

**Estrangement, Dialectic, and Process:**  
**Marx and Engels's Read Rousseau's "Second Discourse"**

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Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau all hold rank in the pantheon of social and political theorists. Not only have they left indelible marks on the history of political thought, their philosophies have directly effected historical events, and have permeated mass consciousness to unprecedented degrees. They all also have a legacy of prolific writing, including dialogue with fellow thinkers. Marx and Engels especially engage with many rival thinkers, both within their own philosophical system and without. It is notable, then, that there is no dedicated treatment of Rousseau's system of social and political philosophy by Marx or Engels. One work of note that would have been of interest to them and them is Rousseau's "Second Discourse," also known as the "Discourse on the Origins of Inequality." There are many analogous ideas between the Communist philosophical system of Marx and Engels, and Rousseau's "Second Dialogue," especially with regards to the conceptions of human estrangement and dialectic. By piecing together sporadic references to Rousseau in Marx and Engels's corpus with evidence from their wider works, it is possible to create a composite interpretation of Rousseau, and, further, to understand why a systematic analysis was never published.

Given their extensive interplay with the intellectual community, both contemporarily and historically, it is not surprising that both Marx and Engels were familiar with the intricacies of Rousseau's social and political works. Despite this familiarity, however, Rousseau features only sporadically throughout their extensive corpora of writing. For Marx, Rousseau is often included as one of a general list of thinkers, either representing the French Enlightenment, or as part of one intellectual strain or another.<sup>1</sup> Besides this general reference, Marx does not present a consistent position on Rousseau's thought. At times he uses comparisons to Rousseau as a disparaging attack against his enemies,<sup>2</sup> while at other times he ridicules their misinterpretation of Rousseau.<sup>3</sup> Further, Marx sometimes uses Rousseau as an authority to reinforce his own point,<sup>4</sup> yet there are also many occasions where he directly criticizes Rousseau's theories, particularly of his conception of the Social Contract.<sup>5</sup> Engels treats Rousseau in a similar way throughout most of his writing, mentioning him offhand in various capacities throughout his works.<sup>6</sup> Engels differs from Marx slightly, in that he specifically devotes some time to analyses of Rousseau, even if in tangential and digressional contexts.<sup>7</sup> Both this treatment, and some of Marx's more thorough references will be treated in more detail below. It is clear, however, that, while

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of these two list types, see Marx, "Leading Article in No. 179 Kölnische Zeitung," 1:201-2.

<sup>2</sup> See Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme," 24:82.

<sup>3</sup> See Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," 5:401-2.

<sup>4</sup> See Marx, "On the Jewish Question," 3:167 and Marx, "Capital, Volume I," 35:735. Cf. Rousseau, "The Social Contract," 4:155 and Rousseau, "Discourse on Political Economy," 3:165.

<sup>5</sup> See Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," 5:80; Marx, "Introduction (Notebook M) to Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy," 28:17.

<sup>6</sup> For his use of Rousseau an intellectual representative, see Engels, "Letters from London," 3:387; Engels, "Louis Blanc's Speech at the Dijon Banquet," 6:410. For negative references, see Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," 24:286, 288; Engels, "Anti-Dühring," 25:19. For positive references, see Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," 24:298; Engels, "Anti-Dühring," 25:21.

<sup>7</sup> See Engels, "Anti-Dühring," 25:129-30; Engels "Letters to Franz Mehring," 50:165.

neither Marx nor Engels ever systematically criticize Rousseau—as they were wont to do with more contemporary theorists<sup>8</sup>—they were intimately aware of both his philosophy and its potential relationship with their own ideals.

We find one of Marx's most unreserved endorsements of Rousseau in "On the Jewish Question," in which Marx quotes a lengthy passage from "The Social Contract" (Marx "Jewish Question" 3:167).<sup>9</sup> Marx believes "Rousseau correctly describes the abstract idea of political man" (167), that is, the concept that the creation of a separate political sphere alienates the political part of man, and naturalizes the self-indulgent 'egoistic man.' Marx says, "The real man is recognized only in the shape of the egotistic individual, the true man is recognized only in the shape of the abstract citizen" (167); this is somewhat of a implicit reformulation of man's alienation from the species-being, formulated later.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Marx acknowledges that Rousseau is accurate enough in his diagnosis of the worker's condition to recognize this form of alienation.

While Marx does mention Rousseau's recognition of the alienation of man from the species-being, he does not delve deeper to uncover the other forms of man's alienation Rousseau describes. In his own way, Rousseau outlines that which Marx calls "the estrangement of man from man" (Marx, "Estranged Labour" 3:277). For Rousseau, after the advent of agriculture and metallurgy, humanity begins to fear the loss of goods and property; this fear exacerbates both natural inequalities and amour-propre in humanity, driving competition between workers and resulting in a widened gap

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<sup>8</sup> Both Marx and Engels would frequently reproduce blocks of text from recent publications for extensive commentary and criticism: for examples of this see Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme," 24:75-99; Engels, "Anti-Dühring," 25:16-312.

<sup>9</sup> See Rousseau, "The Social Contract," 4:155.

<sup>10</sup> For Marx's definition of this particular alienation process, see Marx, "Estranged Labour," 3:275-7.

between rich and poor (Rousseau, “Second Discourse” 3:51). This first economic inequality forces every person to become dependent on the other, yet not in a constructive sense: in that they must each present their cause as profitable to the other. The final result of this ambition is “competition and rivalry on one hand, opposition of interest; and always the hidden desire to profit at the expense of others” (52). Though Rousseau describes it rather harshly, he agrees with Marx, that “within the relationship of estranged labour each man views the other in accordance with the standard and the relationship in which he finds himself as a worker” (Marx, “Estranged Labour” 3:278); for Rousseau’s man cannot relate to others except with explicit reference to the results of their labour and wealth. Therefore, Rousseau not only identifies the same phenomenon that Marx calls “the objectification of man’s species-life” (277), but also his estrangement from his fellow man.

The section of Marx and Engel’s *Collected Works* that devotes the most attention to Rousseau is Engel’s polemic against Eugen Dühring’s science, “Anti-Dühring” (25:129-30). In a slightly unorthodox attack, Engels accuses Dühring of appropriating Rousseau’s process of the development of inequality, and lambasts him for the “vulgarization” of a good idea (133).<sup>11</sup> He then digresses somewhat, in order to explain Rousseau’s compatibility with Marx’s theory of dialectic, when Rousseau’s work is not adulterated by Dühring. In a previous work, Engels lauds Rousseau’s “Second Discourse” as one of the French Enlightenment’s “masterpieces of dialectic” (Engels, “Socialism” 24:289)(Engels, “Anti-Dühring” 25:21). Here, he quotes three blocks of text from Rousseau’s discourse, sketching out a rough picture of his conception of the

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<sup>11</sup> See also 141, 299.

degradation of society by means of its development, and the oppression of the political leader by means of his mandate (129-30).<sup>12</sup> Engels does somewhat exaggerate the simplicity of Rousseau's claims, in the interest of shaming Dühring further. He grafts a Marxists teleology onto Rousseau's statement: "Force alone maintained [the despot in power], force alone overthrows him. Everything thus occurs according to the Natural order" (Rousseau, "Second Discourse" 3:65).<sup>13</sup> Engels claims that, in Rousseau's vision "inequality once more changes into equality; not, however, into the former naive equality of speechless primitive men, but into the higher equality of the social contract" (Engels, "Anti-Dühring" 25:130). While I believe that Engels is right to detect similarities between Rousseau's philosophy and Hegelian dialectic, he is too invested in his polemic to examine the nuance of its difference, and thus grafts his own ideological teleology on to Rousseau's argument as its conclusion.

In looking for the seeds of his own ideology in the historiography he is defending, Engels overlooks, either intentionally or unintentionally, the pessimism of Rousseau's "Second Discourse." Engels presents it in such a way that assumes only one cycle of despotism and violence, leading to an idyllic future, which justifies the past suffering. In his quotation, Engels adds particular emphasis to Rousseau: "Here we have the extreme measure of inequality, the final point which completes the circle and meets the point from which we set out" (Rousseau, "Second Discourse" 3:65).<sup>14</sup> This is, in fact, a perfect example of nascent Hegelian dialectic in Rousseau, and Engels ostensibly emphasizes it for this reason, yet his interpretation is unorthodox, and subverts

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Rousseau, "Second Discourse," 3:49, 56, 65.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Engels, "Anti-Dühring," 25:130.

<sup>14</sup> Emphasis Engel's.

Rousseau's intention. He takes this circle as the move from anarchic, leaderless violence, through prosperity under political power, finally to oppression under the same. This is in the same vein as Rousseau, yet Engels interprets this as the "vicious circle" of capitalism, which "is gradually narrowing ... must come to an end ... by collision with the centre" (Engels, "Socialism" 24:313). Rousseau, conversely, envisions this cycle as repetitive in identical iterations; the end of the sentence, not cited by Engels, says, "whatever the outcome of these short and frequent revolutions may be, no one can complain of another's injustice, but only of his own imprudence or his misfortune" (Rousseau, "Second Discourse" 3:65). Thus, these violent revolutions become the basis of society and of history from this point on; Engels is right insofar as he reads this as a diagnosis of the present socioeconomic situation, yet he imposes a potential escape, a hidden prophesy of the messianic Communist Revolution. For Rousseau, "the inequality that reigns among all civilized Peoples ... that ... a handful of men be glutted with superfluities while the starving multitude lacks necessities" (67) is not an invitation for a forceful revolution, but a brutal reminder of the diseased nature of the *amour-propre* of our society.

Despite the irony of misrepresenting the philosophy he criticizes Dühring for misrepresenting, Engels identifies some key features of Rousseau's budding conception of dialectic. Engels refers to Rousseau's historiography of inequality as a "negation of the negation" (Engels, "Anti-Dühring" 25:130).<sup>15</sup> Had Engels relaxed his dogmatic interpretation, he may have been able to sense the dialectic strain in Rousseau deeper than the surface manifestations of inequality. While there are a myriad of 'negations of

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<sup>15</sup> See also Engels, "From Engels' Preparatory Writings for Anti-Dühring," 607.

negations' present in the "Second Discourse," they all share one proto-dialectical source: the struggle between natural humanity and *amour-propre*. Engels describes dialectic as a process which develops a base in relation to an equally-changeable superstructure (Engels, "Socialism" 24:302, 304); Marx takes up the negation of the negation from Hegel and develops a historiography of economic progress through continuous negation of negation (Engels, "Anti-Dühring" 25:120-1). Rousseau's historiography is one of a naturally good force, the *amour de soi* of natural man, subject to only the needs of benign self-preservation, who nevertheless engenders the destructive forces of *amour-propre* from the innocent attributes of *amour de soi* and pity (Rousseau, "Second Discourse" 3:37, 43). Their *amour de soi* and pity, once enhanced with language, bring about a community, in which competition, esteem, and value are established, kindling the fires of *amour-propre* (46-7). This *amour-propre* breeds discord when mixed with human nature's simple inequalities (51), and through natural reason and *amour de soi*, the negation is negated, and humanity recognizes the snares of wealth and economic inequality, and "unite ... to protect the weak from oppression, restrain the ambitious" (53). This negation, however, is in turn negated by its internal flaw, for this protection against inequality turns itself into oppressive political power (53), which begins the dialectical cycle cited by Engels. This give and take with *amour-propre* is as close to a Marxist "constant motion, change, transformation, development" (Engels, "Socialism" 24:302), as one can have without the specific Hegelian conception and terminology.

It is not surprising that neither Marx nor Engels treats this apparent dialectic in Rousseau's thought. Rousseau occupies a peculiar position in relation to the Marxists.

Marx and Engels ally themselves squarely on the side of materialism over idealism.<sup>16</sup> Thus, it should be relatively easy for them to sift through the annals of philosophy to find those thinkers which fit into their worldview and those whom opposed it. Rousseau, however, does not fit neatly into either the materialist or idealist categories. He opens the Second Part of the “Second Discourse” with a staunchly materialist description of the basic human needs (Rousseau, “Second Discourse” 3:43), which comes strikingly close to the Third Chapter of “The German Ideology,” in which Marx and Engels make perfectly clear that the first possible historical act is the satisfaction of material needs (5:41-2). Nevertheless, Rousseau’s elevation of Pity as one of the primary motivations of human nature would not necessarily fit into the rigid Marxist materialist structure (Rousseau, “Second Discourse” 3:36-7). Further than this, his placement of factors such as *amour-propre* and the general will as the driving forces of humanity and civilization are antithetical to the Marxist ideology of a history driven primarily by class struggle, and entirely by material circumstance (Rousseau, “Social Contract” 4:147; Marx and Engels, “Communist Manifesto” 6:483; Marx and Engels, “German Ideology” 5:35-6). Therefore, it is understandable that Marx and Engels hesitate to treat Rousseau thoroughly, despite their obvious familiarity with his philosophy, as any treatment would put them in the awkward position of either affirming or denying his system, either of which puts them at a disadvantage. If they were to deny his premises, which conflict with their materialism, they would not be able to use his conclusions as support in their arguments; if they were to accept his system, they would fall under criticism from their own ideological party. Therefore, they have accepted the conveniently neutral position

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<sup>16</sup> Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 5:30-1.



of using, perhaps even appropriating, Rousseau's conclusions about various social conditions, yet not systematically so; they save these statements of support for the occasional place in which it may be useful.

Despite Marx and Engels's hesitation to give Rousseau their characteristic thorough criticism, there are distinct connections between many of their basic ideas, particularly in Rousseau's nascent employment of proto-Hegelian dialectic and his conception of human estrangement. Marx and Engels helpfully leave some examples of their interpretations of Rousseau throughout their works, allowing us to piece together an impression of their approach to his process of philosophy. This is precisely what makes their interaction, or pseudo-interaction, so intriguing; what links them across their cultural, social, and philosophical boundaries is their conception of process. Marx, Engels, and Rousseau all present compelling visions of the development of the social maladies of the modern world, and all come to these conclusions through the idea of process, particularly a dialectical process. While they may disagree over the particular factors of this dialectic, whether class struggle, or *amour-propre*, and Marx and Engels may think that Rousseau's Social Contract necessitates "a democratic bourgeois republic" (Engels, "Socialism" 24:286)(Engels, "Anti-Dühring" 25:19), but they can all find a certain common ground. This shared space is that which asserts a continual societal process, leading deeper and deeper into inequality.

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